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ABSTRACT

How the nature of the campus culture helps determine the levels of enrollment and retention of African-American students is examined in this study conducted at Oberlin College, Ohio, a college that has shown relative success in enrolling and retaining African-American students. The study provides excerpts from numerous interviews with students, faculty, staff members, and the Admissions Department involving seven categories: campus climate, Black Studies, support services, admissions, retention, financial aid, and the larger community. Seven observations and recommendations are presented and include: the importance of vigilance in insuring the success of African-American students; the need for African-American students to rely on each other; the importance of a "critical mass" of African-American students on a predominantly white campus; and the need to hire, reward, and retain more African-American faculty and administrators. Another study on the same issue, which coincidentally was being done at the same time as the Oberlin study, echoes very similar results and conclusions; findings of this study are also presented. Contains 20 references. (GLR)

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# CULTURE AND ITS ARTIFACTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THEIR IMPACT ON THE ENROLLMENT AND RETENTION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS

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presented by

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## INTRODUCTION

### African-American Enrollment and Retention

The low enrollment and poor retention of African-American students in predominantly white institutions of higher education are continuing and escalating problems. In 1976, 40 percent of all low income African-American high school graduates entered college: in 1988 the percentage was 30. This is in spite of the fact that the high school completion rate for low income African-Americans increased between 1976 and 1988. In 1976, 53 percent of all middle class African-American high school graduates entered college; in 1988 the percentage was 36. Overall, when considering all races and all incomes, the percentage of high school graduates going on to college, during this twelve year period went up from 53 percent to 57 percent (The New York Times, 1990). Relatedly, during the period 1976 to 1986, the percentage of African-Americans earning degrees (as a percentage of the total number of degree recipients) fell from 10 percent to nine percent (Digest of Educational Statistics, 1989, 1989).

With regard to retention, the national retention rate after three years for African-Americans who enrolled in college in 1972 was 52 percent; the rate for these students after four years was down to 41 percent; and for these students, the rate of graduation after six years was 13 percent. That is, slightly more than one half of the African-American students who enrolled in college in 1972 were still in attendance after three years; one year later it was down to four out of every ten still enrolled. And after six years only a little more than one out of every ten of these students had graduated (National Center for Education Statistics, 1988).

For the class entering in 1980, the retention rate after three years was 50 percent; after four years the rate for these students was down to 21 percent. And after six years, 10 percent of these students had graduated(National Center

for Education Statistics, 1988).

Finally, for the class entering in 1982, the three year retention rate was 25 percent and one year later it was down to 15 percent. At the time of the publication of this data, the six year graduation rate for this cohort was unavailable (National Center for Education Statistics, 1988).

Among predominantly white schools, such campuses as Vassar, Wesleyan and Oberlin offer successful models for the enrollment and retention of African-American students. Strong recruitment and retention policies, academic help and a supporting campus environment characterize these campuses (Carmody, 1988).

Researchers have studied African-American enrollment and retention together (Sedlacek and Webster, 1977). In addition, several researchers have looked specifically at the retention of these students (Bean and Metzner, 1985; Prather and Hand, 1986; McCauley, 1988; Lichtman, Bass and Ager, 1989). I am aware of no studies, however, that have looked at the impact of campus culture on the enrollment and retention of African-American students in higher education. That is my intention in this study.

It is my contention in this paper that the levels of enrollment and retention of African-American students are strongly related to the nature of the campus culture. This campus culture is, I believe, a critical aspect of student life in higher education.

## Culture

More and more, researchers are linking the study of organizations with the study of the concept of culture (Smircich, 1983; Tierney, 1988; Richards and Shujaa, in press). This is a logical linkage. From an anthropological perspective, our day to day behavior and routines are explained by culture (Benedict, 1934). Moreover, some have argued that organizations produce culture and the resultant cultural artifacts (Deal and Kennedy, 1982). Also, the link

is instructive because culture serves at least four functions within an organization. It:

- o determines organizational identity
- o encourages organizational commitment
- o stabilizes the organization
- and o provides a framework for appropriate behavior within the organization (Smircich, 1983)

Indeed, the entire organization is influenced by its culture.

But what is culture? Culture is a dynamic expression of a collective view of the world (Goodenough, 1971). It is a shared way of thinking, based on agreed upon norms, values and beliefs (Siehl and Martin, 1981). Culture influences how new members are socialized into an organization. This occurs through the development of cultural artifacts such as a historical image, organizational climate, sacred norms and institutions.

The historical image captures the sacred norms at various periods of the organization's existence. This image becomes a cultural artifact because it is continually reproduced throughout the life of the organization.

Organizational climate is the day to day symbolic representation of a culture, as perceived by the members of the organization. It is the nature of interactions, the attitudes that people display toward each other, the general mood of the organization and a manifestation of the extent to which there is agreement among the members about the ideal and real state of the organization.

Sacred norms are guidelines and "bottom lines" that are ingrained and that members of an organization consider to be very important. Corbett, Firestone and Rossman (1987) describe these sacred norms. They say these norms:

> ...form the foundation of staff professional identities, and... lend meaning to organizational activity.... As with religion, the sacred becomes symbolized in ordinary events, relationships, and procedures. As these everyday phenomena occur, they affirm the sacred and assure "believers" that all is well.... Though not supported by incontrovertible evidence, the sacred has simply become defined as unquestionably true. (p. 38).

Institutions are additional representations of an organization's culture: however, they are generally organized, stable structured symbols that serve as living and lasting representations of the culture. Cultural artifacts enable the members of an organization to internalize the organization's culture (Martin and Powers, 1983).

The conceptual framework that I am using suggests that an organization's culture evolves over time, and in doing so, gives rise to at least four cultural artifacts or symbolic representations: historical image, organizational climate, sacred norms and institutions.

In the higher education setting, these relationships, depicted in FIGURE I, impact on the enrollment and retention of African-American students. In turn, an institution's record of enrollment and retention of African-American students also affects concomitantly, the institution's culture and cultural artifacts--particularly its historical image.

PLACE FIGURE I ABOUT HERE

It is from this conception of culture serving as the dynamic lifeblood of an organization that I considered Oberlin College's success in enrolling and retaining African-American students. I wanted to understand how people at Oberlin--students, staff, administrators and faculty--understand and interpret the things that happen at Oberlin and how these understandings and interpretations relate to Oberlin's performance relative to the enrollment and retention of African-American students.

## Oberlin College

Oberlin College is located in Oberlin, Ohio (population 8,600), 35 miles southwest of Cleveland. The College is comprised of the College of Arts and Sciences--with about 2,250 students--and the Music Conservatory--with about 500 students. The College was founded in 1833 by the Reverend John J. Shipherd and

Philo P. Stewart with the support of Charles Grandison Finney. In 1835, the Oberlin Board of Trustees stated "the education of the people of color is a matter of great interest and should be encouraged and sustained in this institution." By 1900, one out of every two African-Americans who had graduated from a predominantly white institution had earned their degree from Oberlin College (Oberlin College, 1987).

Throughout the years, Oberlin has professed a commitment to high intellectual standards, a liberal education, excellence in teaching and a social and moral commitment. (Oberlin College, 1987). It has been relatively successful--particularly in the past twenty years--in enrolling and retaining African-American students. The combined graduation and retention rate after six years for African-Americans who enrolled at Oberlin in 1977 was 77 percent. For African-American students who enrolled at Oberlin between 1968 and 1977, the overall retention and graduation rate by 1983 was 70 percent. As of 1986, the combined graduation and retention rates for more recent classes at Oberlin were as follows:

| Enrollment Year | Combined Graduation and Retention Rate |
|---|---|
| 1978 | 53 (after eight years) |
| 1979 | 74 (after seven years) |
| 1980 | 51 (after six years) |
| 1981 | 47 (after five years) |

I recently conducted a study in which I looked at the culture of Oberlin College as it relates to African-American students. In the remainder of this paper, I will report on my findings at Oberlin, focusing on (a) the culture, (b) the cultural artifacts and (c) why Oberlin's culture is so important in Oberlin's laudable record in enrolling and retaining African-American students. I conclude with some recommendations for institutions of higher education.

I believe that Oberlin's culture--and the symbols that reflect it--are important enough to be considered by leaders in other institutions of higher

education who are concerned about improving their enrollment and retention of African-American students.

## STUDY METHODS

### Sample

The sample was composed of eight students, 11 faculty, six staff and six administrators. Along with a research associate, I interviewed a total of six staff people from Student Support Services, Afrikan Heritage House, and Admissions. Eight African-American students were interviewed--two randomly selected from each class (i.e., freshperson, sophomore, junior and senior). We also randomly selected and interviewed five faculty members.

At the time of this study, there were six faculty in Oberlin's Black Studies Department--including a part time person in drama. We interviewed five of the six faculty members. (The sixth member of the Black Studies faculty was not on campus while we were conducting the interviews). In seeking to interview all of the African-American faculty, we found one additional professor and conducted an interview with him also. Finally, we interviewed six administrators in financial aid, student services, and enrollment planning. In total, we interviewed 31 persons. (See Table I).

PLACE TABLE I ABOUT HERE

### Instrumentation

I developed separate interview instruments for students, staff, faculty and administrators. Generally, the questions fit into seven categories: campus climate, Black Studies, support services, admissions, retention, financial aid and the larger community. Each category of respondents was asked to respond to a different, though similar, set of questions and the total number of questions varied somewhat:

- o students - 46
- o staff - 78

- o faculty - 46
- o administrators - 78

The instruments were piloted with students, staff, faculty and administrators at a university in western New York and appropriate changes were made prior to our conducting the actual study.

## FINDINGS

### Culture

Several of the people that we spoke with described the relationship between Oberlin's culture and its historical image. One administrator said: "...the whole ethos on campus is an openness to everyone regardless of race." An African-American faculty spoke on how Oberlin's "legend" affected the behavior of whites at the school:

> It is also what makes a difference in the white people you attract here. They like the fact that that legend is there and I am sure all that contributes to it and makes it all a bit more tolerable. There certainly is a kind of deference to ethnicity and diversity that is characteristic of Oberlin. I am absolutely positive of that. The mind set and the energy of people that come here is the idea that ethnicity and diversity is a good thing.

One white faculty member described Oberlin's culture in the following way: "[the] history...is something that sort of seems in our genes... so that our historical involvement and caring about the education of Blacks is something that we are very proud of." A second white faculty member said: "It is almost an assumption that everybody has--that Oberlin should be educating Blacks, women and other minorities. Institutions, whatever they are, have a culture and this is part of Oberlin's culture." A white administrator added: "I think you have a community [at Oberlin] that ends up caring, trying to figure out how they can do things better and willing to work on it in some joint fashion."

The culture of any institution is shaped, in part, by the presence of key individuals. Oberlin is no exception. Throughout the years, there have been a number of significant people on the Oberlin campus that have served as catalysts

or "agitators" in the perpetuation of Oberlin's culture. Some of the people we talked to described this phenomenon and some of the individuals associated with it. One African-American faculty member described what he saw in this regard when he first arrived at Oberlin:

> When I arrived, what I found was an institution that was making serious efforts to be hospitable, to make amends. More specifically, I found certain individuals who were working seriously ----, ----, Professor ---- in the ---- department and many others: but these were persons who were spearheading the efforts to attract minority students.

When asked how faculty were acculturated to the ways of Oberlin, a white faculty member said of his own observations:

> There was no formal suggestions about this. I think that it happened a lot of discussion with certain colleagues who were particularly concerned with issues and or involved with figuring out. When I came there was a real sense that recruitment of African-American students was going down. And some of us in the ---- department, for instance, did have the sense that we, of course, were not being very successful in attracting Black ---- majors. That was a very difficult problem. So that I think it was ... some members of the faculty being concerned about it but not as a sort of formal thing that I ever got... from the department or the administration on these issues.

In discussing Oberlin's hey day (the 1960's and 70's) one white administrator said:

> We had some very, very important faculty tied with that, involved in the process. It wasn't just administrators. Dean ---- was very committed to expanding the Black population and helping to educate persons who came from backgrounds that might not be as strong as other students had experienced....his heart was in it in all ways. I think that is important. He pressed constantly that we not just talk about things but we do things. There were people like ----, ----, all in the ---- department, ---- in the ---- department. There was another man, ----, in ----, all who got involved in the early stages of planning either the summer program, upward bound, special opportunities as well as talking about the scholarship program....I guess it was the involvement of this early faculty plus key administrators, a sympathetic faculty, for the most part, and a steady board of trustees.

It was not just faculty and staff however. According to one African-American faculty member: "...it also included a lot of agitation by students themselves and by a few Black faculty and staff that were here."

In talking about the structures that have been set up at Oberlin for

African-Americans, and about the role that African-Americans play in the continuation of these programs, one African-American faculty member warned:

> A great deal of emphasis, talk, complaints, resolutions, declaration of we are going to do better and so on. Because the Black faculty and particularly certain of its members have made it their personal crusade and charge to keep it before the Oberlin community. As well as certain Black students and other people. So there is plenty of talk about it and posturing and declaring. The result, however, has not been satisfactory. That is why the commitment on the part of some people and the efforts of most Black people have to continue about this and oftentimes have to be remounted and increased year after year.

## Cultural Artifacts

### Historical Image

A very interesting aspect of this study was the "controversy" over Oberlin's historical image. Oberlin is characterized by many as having a very long and positive relationship with African-American students. However, there is some question as to how much of that characterization is myth. That controversy came out in our interviews. However, another point came out equally as clear: myth or not, the historical image is a very strong cultural artifact at Oberlin.

Of Oberlin's historical relationship with African-American students, one African-American staff person said that: "In relation to other universities [it was] progressive, active and in most cases positive." An African-American faculty member agreed, pointing out that:

> Historically speaking, I would say it has been a very long and prosperous relationship. Over the years, I have felt Oberlin to always be very attentive towards Black students. I mean, given the history of Oberlin with regards to Black people in general, you know, it being part of the underground railroad, the institution has always been quite liberal minded, quite progressive in terms of how it deals with Black people.

Perhaps the most telling description of this relationship came from another African-American faculty member who spoke of fluctuations in Oberlin's historical relationship with African-American students:

> ...I would describe it variously on a continuum perhaps. From extremely

supportive on the positive end of Black concerns for progress and betterment in this country to a very lukewarm and perhaps even a negative attitude of hate to say neglect or blindness or unconsciousness. Not a forthright negative attitude but a negative attitude of omission or neglect of turning the eyes in the opposite direction. There were periods when Oberlin has been very, very even radical when it came to supporting what Black people themselves here at Oberlin and, to some extent, in the nation demanded. Other times they have been almost negative in terms of what Black people at Oberlin have wanted or demanded as well as Blacks in the nation. So, depending on the period or the epoch of the historical times, you will get fluctuation or oscillation up and down this kind of continuum.

The records indicate an early period of warm relations and a third African-American faculty member addressed this period in his comments:

> ...In the early stages of the history of the College, Oberlin stood out from most other institutions, particularly after 1835. The College was founded in 1833 and for a couple of years it was in many ways as segregated in terms of race or in terms of sex as... the other institutions; but around 1835 the College took a position which made itself quite distinguished among colleges at that time and so it was a tremendous leader--an outstanding leader--in terms of admission of minority students--Black students--and of female students and that historical perspective has endured certainly.

A white administrator spoke about another epoch, beginning in the 1960's:

> When we looked at our data, the Black enrollment was down to about one percent. It was very low and it made everybody unhappy and everyone aware that we just hadn't been paying attention to what was going on. We went to work and wrote three grants; the Rockefeller Foundation got funds for two, or was it three. One was to expand enormously the scholarship program; one was to establish what became a prototype to Upward Bound.

A very significant event during this period was the faculty deciding in 1976 to enroll 100 African-American students each year. Another white administrator described the campus activity surrounding that decision:

> [There was] a vote of the general faculty in 1971 to admit 100 Black students and Latino students. Then it was reaffirmed in 1976; it originally should have said "enrolled." It didn't; that was changed to enrolled. There were very lengthy debates in the faculty....It was an issue that was very clearly seen on campus. A lot of people were talking about [it]. There were several special faculty meetings called--not just a monthly meeting. There were three in a row in 1976 to finally iron it out. It was a heavily debated issue. It was clearly the focus of a lot of energy and conversation at the time--both written and verbal.

The Myth

A number of the people that we spoke with at Oberlin--particularly the African-Americans-felt that much of the description of Oberlin's historical image was inaccurate and that the image of Oberlin's positive relationship with African-Americans was largely unfounded. One student said:

> I just don't think what they propound as their image is the truth. It is basically a myth; besides I found out that Oberlin wasn't the first school to admit Blacks. A friend of mine and I went to [the] archives and we were doing research and we found out that Oberlin was the first to institute a non-discriminatory policy against poor Blacks.
>
> There were schools before that; Bowdoin and Dartmouth had already admitted Blacks and there was also Western Reserve [that] had already admitted Blacks; but they didn't advertise it because they didn't want people to think they were admitting negative elements into their school; whereas Oberlin needed the money and they wanted Asa Maham to come here--a really well-known theologian--and he was only going to come here if they instituted that policy; but they decided to publicize it when finally they admitted someone and they passed out leaflets and things with Oberlin as supposedly this abolitionist kind of place. It was just a way of getting money for their school.

An African-American faculty member added:

> I think it has a kind of mythical history that works very well for its public relations. The myth is different than its reality.
>
> The reality is that Oberlin never really served a lot of Black students.... there has never been that many Blacks here to make that much of a difference and those who were here were expected to be part of the mainstream.

When we asked another African-American faculty member to characterize Oberlin's historical relationship with African-American students, he said:

> I think it tends to be a picture that is glowing. It is good but it is not as good as they are always making it sound. I mean you want to go back to the beginning of the College and they were always glad to say that they were the first regular white school to matriculate--or at least to enroll--Black students and women and that sort of thing; that clearly they did but they didn't do much beyond enrolling a few because the history didn't start becoming meaningful in terms of numbers until 1917.... I think they did particularly well in the late 60's and early 70's. I suspect that at some point the Black enrollment was close to 400 students, which even in today's more enlightened period, if you will, we haven't quite gotten to, nor does it seem we will. We are talking about a history that begins to be meaningful only after the struggles in the late 60's and early 70's.

Another African-American faculty member added: "Let me just say that the myth

is much better than the reality.... So there is this wonderful legend that, in my view, in reality, just doesn't measure up." Finally, an African-American staff person added: "Images are positive and reality may be different once a student actually matriculates."

Myth or not, most of the respondents agreed that the historical image that is perpetuated at Oberlin is a very important artifact of the culture of the College. Five of the six administrators that we interviewed agreed with this notion. One African-American administrator spoke about the importance of the historical image of Oberlin as it relates to African-American student retention:

> History is that kind of thing you can never get away from. We can be no better than the building blocks that made us and that's why it is important. Whether it is spoken or just there, I think it is very important. If you are talking about Black students, recruiting or retaining them, it becomes even more important because especially in today's climate, we have all heard about the kinds of things that have been happening on other campuses across the country. There is a resurgence of the kinds of ill feeling and ill will on a number of campuses and I do think that most Black students still feel like this environment does care about them. I don't think any of them would say it is perfect but they do get a feeling there is caring here and that it is because of the history.

Another administrator spoke of the significance of Oberlin's historical image:

> It is very important to be able to say that Oberlin was among the first to enroll Black students, that Oberlin graduated more of the Blacks in a certain period in history, that Oberlin has this faculty legislation now and Oberlin has these kinds of commitments to minority education, has these support structures. I think it is extremely important.

A third administrator was even more straightforward: "I think Oberlin's history forces an obligation on modern administrators....We have a tradition to live up to. As a matter of fact, it would be suicidal for anyone in the administration to buck that tradition." The historical image affects everyone at Oberlin, according to a fourth administrator:

> I think the very nature of the institution going back to the early days of the 1800's when there was such a very, very strong abolitionist sentiment and that is just woven into the very texture of Oberlin and carries on right today from the standpoint of faculty, staff, student body. It has just always been that way.

Another administrator commented on the impact that Oberlin's historical image has on people at Oberlin today:

> I think people are mindful of the history and its impact is probably subtle, but nevertheless there is a kind of legacy, a set of important principles, that got established early that people really feel as part of the fabric of the place. I think that is in the minds of people when they make decisions.

Several faculty members agreed that the history was important. One African-American faculty member spoke of Oberlin's focus on its image:

> Oberlin is one college that is very conscious of its history....Even before I came to Oberlin, and since coming to Oberlin, I knew and was confronted at every stage [with] just how much the experience of the kind of liberal progressive attitude and policy towards Black student enrollment and keeping students here has meant to Oberlin.

A white faculty member said: "I think that the history of the college is one in which we... take a lot of pride in and use a great deal in our recruiting and trying to... establish this as a strong part of the historical image of the college."

A staff person shared the following comment: "Oberlin is very proud of that historical commitment and I think that investment and personal pride in that commitment translates into continued support." A second staff person said:

> The historical significance is in the area of continuing this positive progressive experience that I mentioned--I guess being consistent. They did in the past and they found it to be important and necessary and it all stands to reason that they will continue in that same vain.

One white administrator did not feel as strongly about the importance of Oberlin's historical image:

> I don't really think that it has that much importance. It perhaps did initially to get us going, but I think we have enough momentum at this point that without any history at all we would still be providing the same support services, considering the welfare of Black students here very important. I can't imagine Oberlin really being any other way.

## Sacred Norms

Sacred norms--guidelines and "bottom lines" that are immutable and that members of an organization consider to be very important--influenced by the

historical image of an institution, as well as the learned experiences of the members of the organization. Oberlin, not unlike other colleges and universities, has sacred norms which are symbolic of its culture. One such sacred norm asserts that African-Americans will be tolerated at Oberlin College, and have a right to organizational and institutional expression at Oberlin College. This norm has evolved from the culture that is perpetuated through the historical image. One African-American faculty member described this norm as it relates to Oberlin's Black Studies Department: "If people had their real, real choice they would rather not have Black studies; but they don't have that choice; they are accepting it. They do not consider it as a cherished value. It is something they have to tolerate."

An African-American staff person said: "Oberlin has actively tolerated requests from African-American students to make Oberlin a lot better." Finally, an African-American administrator added:

> I do think it is a tolerant campus.... Just based on experience, the kinds of things I see students questioning here, I've never seen students question before....when you have that kind of spirit in the community there is something about the community that makes the community an accepting place.

## Climate

The day to day climate that exists on a campus can normally be detected by anyone who comes on the campus. Climate is attitudes, behaviors, relationships and the general atmosphere that one experiences on the campus. Moreover, it is a manifestation of the extent to which there is agreement among the members of the organization about the ideal and real state of the organization.

Several people that we talked with described Oberlin's climate as it relates to African-American students. One white administrator said that the climate is: "...a tradition, feeling, a sense of responsibility that permeates our board of trustees, our faculty, right down through the administration and

the student body." In talking about the support services available to African-American students at Oberlin and about the relation between these services and the school climate, another white administrator said:

> ...those services [are] all aimed at trying to create an atmosphere where...one...could hitch up with some aspect of the institution; whether it was just one other student...or whether it is a faculty member or a staff member, I think that kind of thing has been fostered--all aimed at trying to make the place... supportive to Black students.

An African-American faculty member described Oberlin's climate in this way:

> I would say that the day to day climate at Oberlin College, if one were to visit here, a[n] outside student--and we have students coming in regularly to look at us--I think the climate would be one that would be very hospitable, very supportive and students would feel immediately at home in a very hospitable environment.

In comparing Oberlin to other schools, he added: "I think we have a much higher moral commitment and I think to a great extent all of us feel somewhat of an obligation to both students and faculty to demonstrate that in our daily lives. I think it is a very healthy climate."

A second African-American faculty member added this about the perceptions of African-Americans regarding Oberlin's climate:

> I think yes, Blacks perceive Oberlin as a safe place and an alternative to Black colleges. I think it has a very important position in the history of Black education and so therefore Blacks tend to perceive Oberlin as a place where they can trust that, so that creates the climate that lets them [Oberlin] get more students and get more applicants, and get more students enrolled.... I think its policies and procedures are also a product of its history. I think that there are well-meaning people here, people, I find people are good-willed to be here. I also find that there is a desire to do the right thing on the part of most people at Oberlin. It is politically correct to be liberal; it is politically correct to do anti-racist things.

A third African-American faculty member added: "I think it is a very great place....You couldn't have a better school for Black students; they have a great time as a student here." An African-American administrator said: "I think the difference--in comparing [Oberlin] to other schools-- is really an expectation here that Black students feel a part of this College....they are part of the

fabric of the College."

One can look to the degree to which African-American students are involved in the various aspects of the campus life to get a sense of the campus climate. The involvement of these students was described by one white administrator in the following way:

> I would tend to think that, in general, Black students participate at a higher rate in all kinds of activities that are available for all students at Oberlin than students in general do. Black students at Oberlin don't only involve themselves in activities that have to do with being Black or [that are] sponsored by Black Studies or [the Afrikan Heritage] House.... Black students participate much more than students in general.

Another white administrator also talked about his perception of African-American student involvement in the Oberlin community:

> I went to an opera here a few months ago and several of the leading roles were sung by Black students. I see articles in the Review [the student newspaper] written by students I recognize as being Black students. They are very much involved in campus government activities, student council, executive council.

An African-American administrator agreed when he said: "Pretty much Black students are an integral part of the fiber. You'll find them in just about everything. At some colleges, it is just the sports or singers; but they are into everything here. They are on everything." A student added: "I think Black students are involved in a lot of things. There are lots of Black students in student government, lots of them on all those little committees, social board, whatever." Finally, an African-American staff person also saw African-American students as very involved:

> If it is student government, you really do have a pretty good and strong voice. Our [African-American] students do run for student office, be it class president or student organization, alumni reps. I have not seen in recent years any--there might have been some that I might not have seen--but it is rare to see an all-white slate related to student government.

Of course, the campus climate is extremely important in terms of how African-American students feel and how they are treated. If these students feel

alienated, the climate tends to not be good. On the other hand, if they genuinely feel as if they are a part of the community, that is usually reflective of a positive campus climate. On the importance of campus climate, one African-American staff person said simply: "...climate is important., very important....climate is important....I would think it plays a big part in retention. It really does."

## Institutions

Oberlin's culture is reflected in the commitment that the College has made to African-American students over the years. This commitment--symbolized by institutions on Oberlin's campus--was discussed by several people during our visit. I first share general comments about Oberlin's commitment, followed by comments related to the specific institutions associated with Oberlin's commitment to African-American students.

An African-American staff person offered a comparison of Oberlin's Admissions Office with other admissions offices as a display of the College's commitment: "I don't know any [other] predominantly white institution that has three Blacks and two Asians on the admissions staff. Usually there is one Black and if there are two it is very, very rare." Later in our discussion, she emphasized the campus-wide nature of Oberlin's commitment to African-Americans:

> ...it is not just in the Admissions Office as opposed to a lot of institutions that recruit minority students and that is it. There is a commitment in faculty, there is a commitment for support, a commitment for programs that involve Blacks. There are some subtle things that make you feel good that aren't on other campuses that you don't realize. Oberlin is different in that sense. It is probably why they have been able to recruit students and for a while been able to retain students.

A staff person in Student Support Services said of Oberlin's commitment to African-American students:

> I would say Oberlin has a traditional commitment to the education of Black students and also a very practical commitment in that the College does spend significant amounts of money on recruiting and supporting Black students academically.

Programs such as Student Support Services require support from the President on down. This same staff person spoke of the President's commitment to African-American students:

> I think that support is there at the Presidential level. I see that support in terms of budget. The College spends money on our programs....the President is the one who writes the checks, so to speak, for the institutional part. He writes a check every year. I feel very comfortable about his level of commitment.

The Dean's Office has also expressed a commitment to these students with regard to efforts to hire African-American faculty. The same staff person continued:

> If a department is ready to hire someone, the Dean allows the department to bring two candidates to campus routinely. However, if there is a minority candidate that the department wants to bring to campus, then there is three. You can look at three people and that's an expense the Dean's Office picks up.

She concluded by adding: "...we are a pretty supportive institution for Black students who come to a predominantly white institution."

Several administrators spoke about Oberlin's commitment to African-Americans. One African-American administrator talked of how Oberlin's commitment influenced his decision to come to Oberlin:

> When it comes to the people-related problems, i.e., Black students, Oberlin says this is a problem that we need to attack. I think consistently...everything I know about it has spoken to that. That's one of the reasons that I wanted to come and work at Oberlin....it seems as if whenever we say that we need more support for let's say recruitment efforts for Black students, we don't usually get any friction from anyone. They seem to be willing to work with us on those kinds of things.

In comparing Oberlin's commitment to African-American students to the commitment of other institutions, a white administrator said:

> I just think that there is a heck of a lot greater degree of commitment from the part of this institution toward the recruitment and the enrollment of Black students than [in] other institutions. I just don't think they have gone to the extent that we have gone in trying to enroll Black kids. Whatever they say, I don't think they have done it. I can't believe if they had resorted to the programs we have adopted that they couldn't have better results.

Another white administrator spoke about his office's sensitivity to the needs of

African-Americans:

> I know in my division, if we are opening up for a candidate, we'll often invite members of the community... who know anything about this field, minority members, to tell us where we ought to be searching or to give us names: we'll include them in the whole process, selecting, interviewing,...[making] a decision about the person. That's just sort of par for the course in this particular division.

He went on to talk about the commitment of the faculty to African-American students:

> I think the faculty has always been awfully good here about a lot of things including minority concerns. You'll find the faculty willing to sit down and talk with help including minority students if there is a problem. They don't say well, that's the administrators. They are always willing to say that's all of our concern. It just takes ten or twenty people like that to make an enormous difference in a community. I think we have always had that. I have found that faculty has been that way about a lot of issues. They have never separated this one out and made it any different.

Another white administrator added: "I think Oberlin has a very high social conscience. I think our students, our faculty, our administrators, are genuinely concerned about the welfare of others."

Students that we interviewed had a lukewarm view of Oberlin's commitment to African-American students. When I asked one student if Oberlin had demonstrated a commitment to African-American students, she said:

> On a general level in terms of keeping things around like Afrikan Heritage House and getting Black students to come here yes. But on a more individual level, I would say no. I have seen too many students from my freshman year--I'm a senior here--and I have seen too many students that I came here with, I don't see them anymore. They have left because they don't have the money to stay around. I have seen students who come a semester and then take off a semester to work because they don't have the money to stay here. You see too many students who are on academic probation for one reason or another....Black students suffer a lot here and we work extra hard to prove ourselves and to prove that we belong here and that we are worthy of being here. They get you in here and then they say okay we did you a favor; we got you here and now you have to make it on your own.

When asked about Oberlin's commitment to African-American students, another student said:

> I think, in part, it is trying to do that with student support services,

> Black counseling coordinators and psych services, hiring a Black psychologist, one who would be more able to address their needs. I think there is some [commitment] by the College.

Another student said:

> They give lip service to the whole idea of improving minority retention but at the same time who do they put in place as ---- but ---- ---- who is totally a lip man for the administration. He is in charge of ---- ---- now and he is just there to say what the administration wants him to say. He is not going to help Black students out in staying here really. I really don't think they give any focus to that.

Several faculty members made comments about Oberlin's commitment to African-American students. One faculty member offered cautious praise:

> The overall perspective of Oberlin from my standpoint is one of great leadership, great sensitivity, great concern as compared to other institutions of similar caliber and purpose; but in terms of an ideal situation even Oberlin College leaves much to be desired in terms of fairness and justice and eliminating all aspects of injustice. It is a leader among institutions but certainly there are many ways in which you can improve on it and I think we will.

He went on, talking about Oberlin's moral commitment:

> ...there is a tremendously heavy moral responsibility operating here among the faculty, among the students with respect to the treatment of minority students in general, and Black students in particular, and with respect to... social issues, economic issues, whatever they may be. I think the College has the kind of moral understanding of its commitment and role and responsibility to further those aims of justice and fairness.

Another African-American faculty member offered a comparison of Oberlin's commitment with that of other institutions:

> I think that Oberlin's commitment to being liberal and commitment to doing the right thing in terms of race relations does have a kind of sensitivity that sets it apart from many other predominantly white schools. I think there is a deeper understanding and sensitivity to what it means to have a minority population.

In addition to these general comments regarding Oberlin's commitment to African-American students, our respondents also spoke in specific terms. While the culture of a campus is extremely important, of equal significance are the artifactual representations of that culture--including the institutions. Several such institutions exist on the Oberlin campus, and these institutions--

which symbolize the culture--go a long way in perpetuating Oberlin's image as a school that is very tolerant of African-American students. The most significant of these institutions are Oberlin's Black Studies Department, its African-American student dormitory--Afrikan Heritage House--and its African-American student organization--the ABUSUA. Notably, Nelson, Scott and Bryan (1984) speculated, based on their study of 400 University of North Dakota students, that the existence of such institutional arrangements, designed specifically for African-American students, was positively related to the retention of these students.

Without exception, the people that we interviewed at Oberlin spoke of the importance of these institutions in helping African-American students survive--and develop--on Oberlin's campus. Moreover, they spoke of how these institutions served to reinforce and perpetuate the culture which embodies tolerance of African-American students.

Black Studies Department

To the person, there was agreement that Oberlin's Black Studies Department is extremely important. However, there was disagreement as to how well respected the Department is within the College. Black Studies at Oberlin is important for all students, according to one staff person:

> I see them as offering a very much needed area of study and, interestingly enough, they very often have more white students than Black students in their courses. It is an important Department not just for Black students but for all students.

Another staff person added:

> I think a lot of students apply to Oberlin because it has departments like the Black Studies Department and so it is important....a lot of students see the need for a Black Studies Department and probably indirectly are grateful for a Black Studies Department even if they don't major in Black Studies or take courses.

Several people spoke about the success of the Black Studies Department at Oberlin. Enrollment in Black Studies courses--according to one staff person--is

very high:

> Now in the last few years I think Oberlin's Black Studies Department has the highest number of enrolled students, other than the English Department. I know one instance of a class where they had over 100 students registered: now that is unusual for a small college....our courses are heavily patronized by students.

An African-American faculty member spoke about the challenge presented by Black Studies: "In the Black Studies Department you do get a focus on things Black and that presents a richer challenge to both Black students and to white students in trying to integrate a focus on Black people in the world." Another African-American faculty person added: "...the Department at Oberlin is considered a model for Black Studies Departments around the country. Academically and intellectually, I feel that we have some of the best faculty in the country. There is no doubt about it."

He continued:

> I feel that...the Black Studies Department is accepted. I feel that there is always some resistance, because white people sometimes have serious problems with Black intellectual heavyweights....But I mean, intellectually speaking, I would rather be at Oberlin than at a lot of other institutions.

One student offered the following praise for Oberlin's Black Studies Department: "...it is one of the better or best Black studies departments in the country." Another student added:

> I think the Black Studies Department is [a]... fairly accepted department. A lot of white students are interested in Black Studies and taking a course. The acceptance is good by both Black students and white students.

Still, there was significant doubt among those people that we interviewed as to whether most people at Oberlin really respect the Black Studies Department. One African-American faculty person said:

> We have a lot of complaints about...a lot of concern about the administration's perception of the centrality of Black Studies so I would say that if we ever let down to think for one minute that Black Studies is going to take care of itself, you are in deep trouble.

A second African-American faculty person told us:

> We have a Department and the year or during the time when Black studies programs and departments were being cut, we became a Department in '74 or '75 and subsequently we have a major and minor and we already have about 12 or so prospective majors including a few white people.

He added, however, the following caveat: "Through personal experiences, very few people are really genuinely, authentically committed to taking Black Studies seriously." And then he said: "...it has come to my attention--again I can't document this--that advisors... discourage their students from taking Black Studies as useless or worthless..." A white faculty person suggested:

> I think that there is a kind of sense in which it is a marginal program. And I am not sure that all members of the faculty accept intellectually and curricularly the need for Black Studies although they recognize it is a sort of social and political necessity; but not necessarily an intellectual or academic curricular one.

He added:

> My sense is that it is a stable Department in the sense that I don't imagine there is any plan to dismantle it or take its positions away at all....I think the commitment to maintaining the Department is for the imaginable future strong; so I think it is a stable department and, in terms of enrollment, it is a very successful department.

On the other hand, an African-American faculty person added: "...I think the long range perspective of Black Studies would be a good one and a strong one even beyond the current life of the current faculty but I don't think there are any guarantees." And a white faculty person said of Oberlin's Black Studies Department: "I have the impression that it is stable: it's well founded and it is here to stay. I've not heard any criticism of [the] Black Studies program... I conclude, at least, that it is accepted: it's a genuine part of the program."

A white administrator spoke of his perception of the legitimacy afforded the Black Studies Department at Oberlin:

> I think Black Studies is very much accepted as a legitimate part of the College structure and course offerings. My guess is that the enrollment has probably gone up in that Department in the last four or five years. There are lots of white students taking courses. The Department is very much appreciated.

Another white administrator was less optimistic:

> I have a sneaking suspicion that there are more than a few faculty members and academic disciplines--take your pick, chemistry, Latin, history--who might not fully accept Black Studies....I don't think that is a mark against Black Studies. But there is a certain degree of snobbery in the traditional academic disciplines about anything that is new.

He added: "I think it is pretty stable. It's here and it is going to stay--I am thoroughly convinced of that." An African-American administrator shut the door on the discussion of Oberlin's Black Studies Department: "...it will take an act of Congress to abolish that department."

Afrikan Heritage House

We asked people about their perceptions of the Afrikan Heritage House, another institution symbolizing Oberlin's culture and its tolerance for African-American students. Again, its importance was emphasized by virtually everyone that we spoke with. A staff person addressed the importance of Afrikan Heritage House:

> Highly important. Not all Black students choose to live in the House but many do. I think it contributes to a culturally enriching environment for the Black students. It's a place where they can be away from the majority culture for a while if they want to have that family atmosphere....When parents bring their students to campus, they are bringing their students to a predominantly white campus. It is important for parents to see that there is a place, a refuge, a comaderie. Again this family atmosphere they can be a part of if they so choose. Certainly not all Black students choose to live there. But it is important that it is there as a choice.

Another staff person added:

> Incredibly important. Some may not realize it but that's not always the fault of the student. Sometimes you don't realize [at] the age of 18 to 22, the age span of four years is not what you will realize ten years later. Though a student may discern, well it's there and it's nice to go visit, they will not realize the impact of its existence until much later in their lives.

An African-American faculty member, upon being asked how important the Afrikan Heritage House was, said simply: "Critical. Life-saving. Anything positive I can say." Another African-American faculty member added:

I mean it is unique. We have kids from Yale here; we have kids from Indiana University and other schools who are amazed at just the physical plant. The physical plant of Afro-American House....It is extremely important. It gives them a place that is theirs. I have had white kids who come to dinner for instance at Afro House and they will say something to me to the effect, "Mr. ----, it is amazing, Black kids are so different here." "What are you talking about?" "Well on campus they seem real hostile. But you know down here they are relaxed; they are comfortable; everyone is laughing and joking and it seems like a family." Which I think is very pleasant on the one hand but on the other hand it is true. Sometimes the Black students are somewhat hostile on the campus because they feel intimidated. You know and it comes out, crazy, but the bottom line is that when they go back to their own sanctuary--our sanctuary--the guards can be let down.

A white faculty member, who had visited Afrikan Heritage House, said:

Afrikan Heritage House is important to some people. I have been to some of their functions and enjoyed it very much. I think the Afrikan Heritage House is particularly important on campus. I think that really gives a sense of community.

Finally, another African-American faculty person added:

I think that's very important in the social and cultural life of Black students. Very, very important. I would say it is probably the most important institution for Blacks at Oberlin in terms of their social life and cultural programs bringing Black artists and intellectuals and sponsoring debates, a forum for all kinds of Black organizations both students and staff and faculty.

When asked, all of the students that we talked with had something to say about the Afrikan Heritage House. One student said:

I think it is important for people to have a place to feel comfortable--to go back home and relax and not always be on guard. Some people are comfortable with themselves no matter where they are...come in a completely white dorm and still know who they are, feel comfortable. Not many of us today have reached that level of self-confidence and level of self-assuredness about themselves and so I feel for us as young Black Americans growing [up] here in this country places like Afrikan Heritage House and a family home are necessary. If not for political [reasons], at least for that family. I think Afrikan Heritage House appeals to Black students for different reasons. I think most often the reasons would be I feel very comfortable there. I don't need to put on any airs. I want to be myself. Also to learn about other people.

Another student added:

I think it is really important. I think people are recognizing now, maybe not so much when they first come in as freshmen but the more you are here [and] you have to deal with these people on this campus you begin to recognize the importance of having a center for Black people.

The ABUSUA

A third institution which, again, is, by all indications, an important cultural artifact at Oberlin is the College's African-American student organization--The ABUSUA. One white administrator said of the ABUSUA:

> I think that a Black student union of some type at Oberlin, whether it is the ABUSUA or not, is critical. I don't know how a minority group would be able to maintain its identity and maintain themselves in a place like Oberlin without some kind of a place called their own where they can be who they are and share their common culture and identity and be able to go back out in the larger community and function.

Another white administrator who had questioned the value of Oberlin's Afrikan Heritage House, said of the ABUSUA:

> I think that is more important [than the Afrikan Heritage House]. I think it gives support for one thing. I think the opportunity for Black students to get together and discuss things, I think it is much more important [than the Afrikan Heritage House].

A third white administrator said:

> I think to well over fifty percent it is a very important organization socially, in terms of the things they sponsor, or the things they facilitate with regard to getting involved in community affairs. I suspect you will find ... some students for whom it is not as important. They plug immediately into other campus organizations, whether it is dance or theater, or whether it is politics, or something else... Some time there is even a division. Some students feel that ABUSUA pushes them too hard to conform to a pattern so that will cause them to stay away even more. But I suspect you will find well over fifty percent [feel that it is important].

An African-American administrator said of the ABUSUA:

> It is extremely important. The one thing it does more than anything else, it speaks to that sense of pride in oneself and in ones culture and what one really has to offer to this community. I think that is the greatest thing..... It gives them a sense of belonging.

The faculty were similarly supportive of the ABUSUA. One African-American faculty member said:

> I think to the majority of students, ABUSUA is an essential organization--very, very vital to their development and sense of sanity and moral strength and determination to do well at Oberlin College. It is a very important organization. The evidence of that is that it gets substantial funding from the institution by other students; it seems to be widely supported. It takes strong and important positions; for

example in South Africa [or] on the ways that Blacks may be treated at Oberlin College. So I think it is an important organization to keep the institution alert and concerned about issues affecting this very oppressed group of people.

A second African-American faculty member added:

> ABUSUA is, of course, extremely significant because as the name itself suggests "the family," not only do we have the structure, the House, the facility, but you need to have the organizational base and ABUSUA is the organizational base at the student level for activities that not only emphasize Black culture and tradition but also really shows off Black people in the larger community. In fact, they are the most potent student organization on campus when you look at all the allocations they do yearly. ABUSUA gets more money if you consider that we only have 400 at the most Black students in the College, that is very significant. They are so active generally that not only are they able to do the kinds of things that Black people [need], but in fact they are able to take leadership away from the majority of students in terms of general student politics. So that is very important.

Of the ABUSUA, one African-American staff person simply said: "Incredibly important." A second African-American staff person added: "ABUSUA is probably one of the most active organizations on campus, historically and presently." A third African-American staff person was a bit more philosophical:

> I think it is important in terms of bringing students together.... They are a supportive base for students. Also, they do have a budget that brings in speakers and artists and those kinds of programs that are of interest to Black students.

Finally, a white staff person spoke of the critical importance of the ABUSUA for the growth of African-American students:

> It is a very important arena for students to develop leadership skills, for students to develop their own maturity, their own identity, their own cultural identity. I think it is a very effective organization for the upperclassmen.

As we expected, students also emphasized the significance of the ABUSUA in maintaining the dynamism of the organizational culture. One student said:

> I think ABUSUA is very important to certain students, myself included, because it does give us a connection and we just be together and be free in ourselves. It is fairly important to a large group of students, but to some, it is just not what they need. They don't perceive it as being what they need.

A second student said of the importance of the ABUSUA:

I think it is important because they watch out for the needs of the Black students and everything. Without them things could just go by and you wouldn't... I don't know how to explain it but I do think they watch out for you.

On the other hand, one student spoke about the ABUSUA in relation to a north campus-south campus split amongst African-American students on Oberlin's campus. When asked about the importance of the ABUSUA, she said:

I think that... depends on who you are talking about specifically. If you are talking about Black students at the House, it has done a lot of things and is in the process of doing things and a lot of them are involved in ABUSUA. But I think once you start getting outside the House, you start getting into north campus and there are a lot of Blacks who just don't agree with its existence and don't want it to exist because they say that's separatism,... segregationism and we are keeping ourselves from making this place a better school by separating ourselves from them.

## Admissions

My earlier point was that Oberlin's culture has contributed to the creation of an environment of tolerance toward African-American students. The end result, for African-American students, is that they are enrolled and retained at Oberlin in numbers significantly larger than is the case on a national level. In this section, I describe, through the words of the people that we spoke with at Oberlin, the College's posture toward the admission of African-American students. One white administrator described a slight decline in African-American student enrollment that occurred in the late 1970's:

I would say in the late 60's, early 70's it was a good thing to do and Oberlin was at the forefront in terms of enrolling minority students., particularly Black students. Everybody else got into [it and] the pool became reduced and Oberlin began to experience problems in attracting Black students and getting them admitted and enrolled because others were after the same pool and I think that the enrollment of Blacks over the years began to decline based on numbers that were coming in the freshman class. While the effort was being made, the effort was not being made beyond what had been instituted previously when they had been highly successful. When they had to face competition in the pool, I don't think anything special was done to overcome that, to make it more attractive to enroll Black students and the enrollment actually began to decline in terms of actual numbers of Black students admitted. I don't think Oberlin's commitment necessarily went away but it's realization through what was happening was being weakened.

A second white administrator described how Oberlin bounced back in the 80's:

> They have been successful in the last three or four years in getting the numbers up slightly when others have been going down.... The sad thing is what is happening nationally, an enormous problem, a national disaster, I think. It is a crisis that has to [be] attended to at the governmental level. That's what we are bucking against and I think they have been doing something right to keep our pool at least at the point and going up slightly. I suspect that's because the people there are watching the process pretty carefully.

Another white administrator added:

> I think Oberlin does far more than any other national liberal arts college toward recruiting Blacks. It is not even close. Wesleyan, one of our main competitors does fairly well. They have I think 8.8 percent [in] last years freshman class as opposed to our ten, which is quite a substantial difference. It is one of Oberlin's distinguishing characteristics, I think.

An African-American faculty member agreed:

> I think one of the reasons it is doing a lot better these days is because of more Black staff involvement in the process. For instance, the fact that the current Director of Admissions is Black and that for the last few years they have had an Office of Minority Admissions that caters especially to the needs of Black students, Black Africans, other minorities, I think have been very important in this upswing.

Finally, an African-American administrator talked of the specific things Oberlin does to encourage African-American prospective students:

> ...we don't begin by looking at those quantitative data, for example, like test scores. We start with other kinds of things. We look at 'sticktoitiveness.' Has the student anything in his or her profile that demonstrates that he or she grappled with some problems and stuck with it? Is there a sense of the student knowing self and sort of having that upward mobility? We look at all those things first and then try to determine can this student survive in an academic environment like this. Then we will look at the test scores. Using those kinds of measurements, we are not holding something like a test score when we know most of the Black students that apply here aren't the highest test scorers. We are not holding that thing over their heads and we aren't using that as a bias before looking at the whole profile.

At another point in the discussion he added:

> ...we treat the Black students, well the minority students, since we are talking about the Black students, somewhat different in that we recruit the parents at the same time as we recruit the students. We think that is important. Many of the Black students we are dealing with are first generation; they are the first in their families to be going to college.... Sixty percent of those who apply are first generation. So

what that means is that mom and dad need just as much help as that student needs in terms of understanding whom we are, what we are about, what this whole admissions process is about. So we do a lot of phone calling, a lot of letter writing, a lot of follow up.

We also put them in touch with a... student who is currently enrolled on the campus as a big brother or a big sister and we pay the postage for that individual to write prospective students and share anything that needs to be shared.... In addition to that, we also try to look at their financial resources and we work with the Financial Aid Office to see that they are packaged in a way that they don't have a heavy loan burden and we seem to think that is very, very important.... A lot of tender, loving care.

When asked about the relationship that Oberlin has with high school counselors of African-American students, he added:

I would be surprised that [there] would be any place where there were minority students, or Black students in this case,,where the counselor or the advisor for the student at the secondary level would not say I know you are going to be treated well at Oberlin.

Several of the faculty members that we talked with shared their views on Oberlin's attitude toward the enrollment of African-American students. One white faculty member spoke about Oberlin's recent effort to attract African-American students in the sciences:

The big campaign over the last couple of years has been to increase the number of African-American students in the sciences, and that they have tried to generate some scholarships for minority students in the sciences. And so they made a lot of effort in that.

A student spoke of the climate of the Admissions Office:

I think in terms of the Admissions Office, the people they have working there, ---- ----, ---- ----, I feel the climate is good there. I see them working constantly trying to get students involved in admissions process and doing recruiting and what not. They always want ideas of what appeals to students in high school. The Admissions Office tries hard.

When asked if it matters who is in the Admissions Office, another student responded:

There is a minority admissions person in the Admissions Office and that is really important because they do have a sensitivity to where the Black students are coming from. Because of the biased nature of the standardized tests--SAT and ACT--and they are able to say well this student from the inner city high school had scored let's say a 980 on the SAT which is lower that what Oberlin would normally accept, but which is

high compared to what's going on at that school; maybe they can give him a little boost. They are obviously intelligent and have strived academically at their own school. I think so--yes.

## Persistence

In the next section, I present the words of the people that we dialogued with, as they spoke about their perceptions regarding the retention of African-American students at Oberlin. First, I present a few of the many comments that were shared with us regarding the fact that African-American students are still academically, socially and financially disadvantaged when they arrive at Oberlin. Then I offer some general comments on Oberlin's commitment to African-American student retention.

First, an African-American administrator spoke about the different kinds of financial problems that African-American students have:

> Where they become different, I think it has to do with financial issues not necessarily financial aid. What I mean by that is some students have expressed to me the following types of concerns. "I'm here at Oberlin; I'm okay. My mom, my dad, my three sisters and my two brothers are back home. My dad is out of a job and my mom is on public assistance and they aren't living and I'm going crazy. How can I live better that they? I want to help; I can't help." So it is that kind of a financial problem and some students who leave, leave because they want to be near home to provide that kind of support. I've heard those kinds of things. So it is a financial issue of that sort. The other financial issue is when there is more than one sibling in college; students begin to really be concerned with mom and dad... "really struggling to have me and my brother or me and my sister at these different places and I really think it would be better if I went back to help them with that." We get some of that.
>
> Other financial issues are many of our Black students have not really had opportunities in the past to deal with good effective management of their monies and at times they don't do as good a job with that and I think we need to be more proactive helping them to do that. So sometimes they might find themselves in trouble where they may owe some monies and it gets a little discouraging how they are going to get that paid back and them some of them eventually will leave because of that. Again, it is a financial reason, but not necessarily a financial aid reason.

An African-American staff person spoke about how the financial experience at Oberlin for African-American students is different than it is for white students:

> It is different for Black families in terms of finances than it is for white families. They send a child off to school and it looks like they have enough money. But there are a whole lot of other things that affect them. The first generation to go off to school and learning how to handle paying for school is different for them. Even though they may have the same amount of money, it is different in terms of going to school and leaving your family behind.

A white administrator talked about finances and the necessary cultural adjustment that African-American students must make on Oberlin's campus:

> I think a higher percentage of Black students have some financial need than the average other student.... I think the integration of the student into the community enters into it a neat deal. How at home they feel; I think there are different cultural factors at play.... I think its harder for a Black student. I am just speculating. I'm sure it's harder to feel at home at Oberlin. Real efforts have been made to relate, to provide the services to help with the transition. This all figures into retention. I think what happens in the first two weeks is what determines whether a student will stay or not and I think this is part of it all.

Another white administrator spoke of the racism experienced by African-American students at Oberlin:

> The one thing that Black students experience that white students do not experience is discrimination and racial prejudice. It does impede their progress to graduation to the extent that it does exist and to the extent that it takes away time from their study or anything else. Black students at Oberlin do experience racial discrimination and it does have an effect on their progress toward graduation.

An African-American faculty member also observed the academic hardships and cultural shock that African-American students experience at Oberlin:

> ...Black students typically would not have scored high on SATs, typically will not have as high a grade point average, or put another way, Blacks probably academically speaking overall generalizing but overall probably would not be academically as strong, number one. Number two, Blacks coming into this environment come into a predominantly white environment not a predominantly Black environment. So Blacks have the hurdle of showing the scars of discrimination by the group being probably not as strong as the dominant group academically speaking and then having to adjust to a culture and environment here that is very different. So a white student, a non-minority student has an advantage either in terms of early preparation or in terms of an environment to which he or she doesn't have to make as many adjustments.

Another African-American faculty member spoke of the stress that African-American students experience: "stemming from perceived experiences of students

that has to do with racism and other kinds of bad things that happen to Black students here. That is no excuse for that and that does happen."

A white administrator said:

> I think that at Oberlin, Black student retention has always been a function or focus of [Student Support Services] when it was called Developmental Services and Student Support Services. Oberlin doesn't have a minority student affairs office, per se. [Student Support Services] functions in that capacity as well as other capacities. It focuses on minority student retention and progress toward graduation.

A white faculty member spoke of Oberlin's image with regard to African-American retention: "I know that there is a great deal of concern particularly about Black retention. How much that is translated into action, substantive action, I don't know." A white staff person told us about one aspect of Oberlin's commitment to African-American student retention:

> It is a priority now for [Student Support Services]. That's one of [their] main goals for this year and the coming year. We would like to see Black student retention be identical to that of white students, which you know is not identical. We would like to do better than we are doing. For us, in our department, it is a departmental priority. I think it is fair to say, institution-wide retention period is an issue before the faculty. They are concerned, they are aware and to the extent the faculty does see this difference, between Black and white student retention, we are going to be thinking about how can I make improvements, adjustments to help with this.

An African-American staff person agreed:

> I think we are more sensitive to what happens to these first generation students in terms of time that we spend, not just a half hour meeting but connecting them to the resources. Having them over to dinner, taking them to lunch,... [making] them comfortable.

Another African-American staff person devulged one of Oberlin's "secrets" for the retention of African-American students:

> We have also taken probably more high risk students from the state of Ohio because we found that location is key in retention of Black students. If they can get home on weekends, they don't get frustrated if they don't have to go 800 miles.

A key area that is related to student retention is student support services. Much was said by the people we spoke with about these services. One

student did not speak favorably of Oberlin's Student Support Services: "I feel the contact with students in terms of what Student Support Services is doing is limited and I don't feel they are reaching out as much in that area." However, another student added: "I think generally, I know people that need tutors get them. People, if they need help and ask for it, they get it."

An African-American faculty member said:

> Oberlin's program is extensive to the extent that they go beyond basic tutorials, they go beyond providing cultural programs, all of which are very important. But they have classes in expository writing; they have classes in study-related skills; they have classes in reading enrichment; they have counselors available to students virtually on a 24 hour basis. That may be somewhat of an exaggeration, but it is only exaggerated to the extent that faculty members and student counselors, peer counselors who are available to students all their waking hours, no doubt.... The learning process... which is one of the most interesting things about Oberlin is one that never stops; it absolutely never stops. I am not trying to be a rah rah cheerleader for Oberlin, but I am very proud of that. That makes me feel very good. All of those tie into or are directly related to student support services.

Another African-American faculty member was more straightforward:

> I think Oberlin College has one of the most outstanding programs designed to help all students, particularly any academically weak student. I think we are virtually peerless in that group, particularly among first rate institutions.

He continued at another point: "I think Student Support Services here is without peer. I think it is extremely vibrant, energetic, and I know the people involved are deeply committed to helping all students."

An African-American administrator spoke of a key characteristic of Oberlin's Student Support Services:

> The other thing that I think we do is having a support system that is not under the umbrella of a stigma that makes Black students feel that it is there only for Black students. It is a cooperative, expansive, support system where all students go. So that negative stigma is removed and I think that is a good positive measurement of the student's worth.

Another administrator gave a broad picture of support services at Oberlin:

> There are several ways in which students can get skill enhancement or extra help. Many of the departments sponsor help sessions. The students themselves have clubs and student organizations; for example, there is a

> Black science student organization; there is, of course, the academic programs available through the Student Support Services which are also very unique in that there are courses regularly offered for credit for graduation. The areas that we still service are math and reading and study skills. They are no longer doing writing because that was a program of ours which has been institutionalized by the College in its expository writing program.
>
> We also, of course, do tutoring and tutoring is available in every subject in every department and is available either on a one-on-one [basis] or [in] group sessions. We also have positions which we instituted within this Department called student interns. They are students who have graduated, mainly in the sciences, and they do the tutoring for the introductory science and math courses.... I think that the resources that are available are quite a lot. There are areas where we are not doing as good as we can, but we are working on it. There is a lot available. In most cases where it isn't available and there is a need, we can find a way to meet the need.

Another administrator echoed these sentiments:

> ...for a long time it has been possible to get tutorial or special class instruction in the quantitative areas, in the writing areas and in study skills. Some of that is done, as I say, through groups and/or classes and some of it is done through tutoring, some of it is done through private lessons with people. But all of those things have been available for a long time with a heavy accent. Then, additionally, some courses have been added to both math and English to help people who still need assistance with composition, [and] general writing skills, but [who] no longer need to be tutored on an individual basis; they are past that point. So there are two or three tiers one can plug into to get assistance. There is a lot of energy that goes into that.

## CONCLUSIONS

### Summary

I have shared, through the words of the people that we spoke with at Oberlin, how these people perceive Oberlin. These perceptions fit well into my conception of culture in higher education and the role that it plays in the day to day operation of a campus vis a vis efforts to enroll and retain African-American students.

The people that we spoke with at Oberlin agreed that it is the strength of the way things happen at Oberlin--what I have termed the culture--that leads to the school's success in enrolling and retaining African-American students. Moreover, it is through cultural artifacts that this culture is evidenced.

The culture at Oberlin is strong and dictates tolerance of African-American students. Through its historical image, sacred norm, climate and institutions--including AHH, BSD and ABUSUA--Oberlin has perpetuated this tolerance through the years.

## Recommendations

I have derived several recommendations from this study. There are implications for Oberlin and for other institutions. First, vigilance is important in insuring the success of African-American students on predominantly white campuses. Oberlin is not a panacea; it could be doing much more than it is doing. This point was made clear by many of the people that we talked with. No matter how effective a given campus may be in the enrollment and retention of African-American students, continued vigilance on the part of students, staff, administrators and faculty--African-American and white--has been, and will continue to be critically important. The role of students, it seems, is most important. One African-American faculty member spoke of the role that students had played in the formation of Oberlin's Black Studies Department:

> ...people do not consider it desirable or even valid. But they have no other alternative legally and the reason that it is legally institutionalized, accepted and supported to the extent that it is, is because the students, over the years, particularly during the late 60's and early 70's, demanded it and that momentum, even though it might have died down generally in the nation, is, I think, what eventually propelled Oberlin in '75 or '74 to departmentalize Black Studies--and to grant it a major and to give it the status at least on paper that any other department has.

An African-American staff person added:

> ...people have to be on their guard regarding making sure that the Department stays. It would be difficult for Oberlin to do that but it is possible given the right climate and the right people who buy into the racist notion that Black Studies is just an unnecessary part of their curriculum and people do that.... It is a possibility given, you know, everything falling into place, Oberlin's Black Studies could quickly disintegrate.

Another African-American faculty member spoke of the ever-present ugly face

of racism at Oberlin:

> ...there are a lot of things that [are] done in a very subtle way and we have to have procedures that will help Black people deal with this thing here rather than assume that this is a very healthy climate. Because there is a great deal of racism here. We have to address these things informally and formally.

Another African-American faculty member warned:

> I think that the institution has been and remains quite supportive of our efforts. So, in 1988, I can certainly say that my view is that the institution has more than a benevolent attitude. It has a strong supportive attitude with respect to Black Studies and its faculty. Again my concern is that we will have to work to insure that over the years. We can't simply take our existence for granted. We have to remain continually vigilant.

An African-American staff person spoke of the vigilance of the Student Support Services staff:

> They do have to intervene... for instance, with the advisement and academic standing committee because they look at this person's grades and say let's put them out of school. Yet it is not just their grades but this is the reason why and it may not be a reason that they can understand but it is a real reason. So they do a lot of that.

A white administrator added: "I know it is the kind of thing that takes constant nurturing and constant struggle to maintain. If you relax or let it go by benign neglect, enrollment starts slipping."

Second, as in every other facet of life, African-Americans who are students in higher education ultimately must be able to rely on each other for their success. Much of the success of African-American students at Oberlin is related to African-Americans helping African-Americans. One student discussed this phenomenon in relation to Oberlin's Afrikan Heritage House:

> I see the House as a separate entity from Oberlin because I don't really see it as something that Oberlin wants, but its here because people have really fought for it and because if they tried to take it away there would be such an uprising. I feel like I have gotten a lot of support from the Black community but not necessarily from Oberlin.

Another student spoke of how getting oriented to Oberlin is facilitated, in part, by other African-American students:

...as soon as you get here, it was kind of a shock to me, but you get letters about things that are going on, even if you are not involved directly with it. You are always told what is going on from different organizations and everything. It helps to keep you aware of what is going on.

Later she added:

It shocked me. I didn't come from a terribly unfriendly part of the country, but when I came here, students, especially Black students, are very friendly. They all say hello and it just, for a while I was just sitting back and saying what's going on; they must be confusing me with somebody else.

An African-American staff person said:

What is more effective is the peer mentoring liaison. Students to students, role models. Somebody is a junior and you are a freshman. The junior takes that person under their wing. That not only supplies them with academic information about how to survive but also provides that concept this person made it; he's doing well.... There is positive reinforcement there. Also, the older students help the network. They may not have all the answers but they put their peer into the right places at the right time so that's another way of network mentoring. This is where you need to be in. I am not the person to do it for you, but let me introduce you to ---- ---- and they can get you into that and they will see that you get what you need.

It doesn't have a dependency relationship but you can see the chain keeps going and what is kind of creative about it, is sometimes the subordinate in the relationship actually helps the role model also become the developmental stage, the 18 to 22 year old be role model in the process where they come from. They begin to grow in their own right; they begin to feel their own strength which helps them, I think, continue to stay in Oberlin and continue to grow.

Third, on predominantly white campuses, a critical mass of African-American students is important for several reasons. A reasonable number of African-American peers provides role models and academic, social and cultural support for these students--critical ingredients for a successful college experience. Many of the people that we talked with echoed this view. African-Americans helping African-Americans is only possible because of the existence of a "critical mass" of African-American students at Oberlin. Of this critical mass, one faculty member said: "I think there is a kind of critical mass here at Oberlin which is very supportive to Black students."

A staff person added:

> ...because we have a fairly significant percentage of Black students in the population here, there is that critical mass. I do think you have to have a critical mass of Black students to feel supported and to feel that they have a community of interest.

Finally, a white administrator captured the essence of the importance of a critical mass:

> I have a theory also that has to deal with a certain number of a minority being enrolled on campus being sufficient, a critical mass if you will, and when you start slipping and not enrolling as many, and you are also losing them through withdrawal, the numbers of Blacks on campus are not sufficient to support themselves as well as getting on with the business of being a student and the support structures begin to slip away and that becomes a problem. We need to have sufficient numbers which Oberlin has. I don't know what a sufficient number is but I think what they have is sufficient to maintain a presence that also attracts other students and then makes Oberlin true to its commitment.

Related to Oberlin's critical mass of African-American students is the unusual racial composition of the larger Oberlin community. Said one white administrator:

> It is one of the strange things about Oberlin that other schools don't have and that is that we have a town of 8,000 and 35 percent of the population in the town happens to be Black. That makes Oberlin very different from other rural campuses like Wooster where you don't have that kind of thing.

Fourth, Oberlin, like most predominantly white schools, has a critical need to hire, reward and retain a much larger group of African-American faculty and administrators. These individuals are critical as role models for African-American students--and all students. One administrator spoke of the difficulty in hiring African-American administrators:

> Insofar as hiring administrators, I know we have a tough time; you remember ---- ----, ---- and I used to talk about this. The problem we run into always is the very candidate that we want for a particular position--it might be a Black person--is able to command a much higher salary some place else. ----'s view always was, we ought to go ahead and pay that person that higher salary because if we do that the argument of next door might well if all of the other people at that job level are down here and you are going to hire this Black person at this level, you just can't do it. ----'s view was go ahead and hire that person and that will serve as a pressure to bring these people up to that level. The

next door didn't necessarily like that view. My observation has been the biggest problem in hiring Blacks is... the administrative not being able to pay enough. I remember x number of years ago they wanted to hire somebody down in [the] Dean of Students area and the number one person took a job in another institution, the same job, but making over $10,000 more than we would pay.

Several African-American faculty spoke about the shortage of African-American faculty at Oberlin. On the absence of African-American faculty in science, one African-American faculty person said: "I am scandalized by the fact, you see, that there is one area that bothers me a lot; [it] is that there are no Black scientists, not a single one." Another agreed:

> I think the one area in which I don't see much evidence is in the sciences. Because there is no single Black person in the hard sciences, mathematics, computer sciences, whatever, biology, chemistry and physics, there is no Black person. I just can't understand for the life of me why this has not occurred all through these years. Although sometimes you can appreciate that because most Black people make more money in industry if they have a degree in chemistry than teaching at a small liberal arts institution like Oberlin.

Another African-American faculty said:

> ...Oberlin seems to be less effective in its recruitment particularly of long term and continuing faculty. Black people come through here a year, six months or two years maybe and then they are gone. People who get a tenure track position who are Black do not come quite frequently.... In other words, in terms of general staff, they seem to be rather effective. In terms of long term continuing faculty they are not as effective.

In speaking of Oberlin's treatment of those African-American faculty that they do have, this faculty person added:

> ...while I am not angry or embittered or disappointed about the relationship that came between me and Oberlin, I am, on the other hand, not bubbling with enthusiasm and a great [deal] of unshakeable appreciation. I think that while it has been a rather positive relationship it could have been better.

A colleague said: "I mean frankly, I am very disappointed about being here.... I am not really having a great time as an instructor here because I am doing so much more that is not being recognized by the institution." On a more optimistic note, another African-American faculty member said:

> ...In the past couple of years I would say the institution has made a particular effort to attract unusually qualified and outstanding Black faculty. I think in the past couple of years we see that happening which is a precedent. For example, we saw that a Black person was given tenure instantaneously with his appointment which is unprecedented.

Fifth, there is a need, at predominantly white institutions, for African-American bodies or organizations composed of students, staff, faculty, administrators and community people. The function of this structure would be to oversee what is happening with African-American people in general, and individually, within the college community. The body would serve as a voice for the African-American community and as a support group for its members. In the early 1970's, Oberlin had such a group that worked well for a while. They started a similar group in the 80's, although it is made up of only faculty and staff. Of that currently operating group, one staff person said:

> ABC is helpful to us, the Association of Black Concerns, though it is not a political organization; at least it is a forum where Black people who want to discuss whatever is on their mind can do so. That's about the greatest advantage.

It might be worthwhile for the ABUSUA EXCO at Oberlin to send a representative to that group to say that they would like to have some student representation so the group could deal with larger African-American community issues.

Sixth, at institutions like Oberlin, it is critical that the Black studies department and student support services are in constant on-going communication with each other and work together. By doing so, replication of services is minimized and complimentary efforts can enhance student success. Two people mentioned this in their comments with us. A staff person said:

> I wonder what the effect would be if there was more of a relationship between [Student Support Services] and Black Studies. I see that as something they are working on. I don't see all that much now. I think it would be positive for us to do.

An African-American administrator said: "I think part of the problem is that we have so many diverse centers of Black people. We have Black people in so many

different places. It is hard to centralize anything.'

Seventh, institutions such as Oberlin's Afrikan Heritage House, its ABUSUA and its Black Studies Department are critical for the survival of African-American students on predominantly white campuses. This is so because, in reality, we live in a very segregated society, where most white people prefer to live among other white people and most African-American people prefer to live among other African-American people, et cetera. This, of course, is not ideal for many of us, but it is America's present reality. Therefore it is unfair (and unrealistic) to expect that African-American students will just blend into a white-dominated environment--where their culture is not understood or respected and where few adjustments are made for their arrival--with no adjustment problems. The institution has to adapt to the particular needs of all of its students--including African-American students. Failure to do this will result in the continuation--and escalation--of the present racial crisis that we find in American higher education (Altbach and Lomotey, 1990).

## Epilogue

While my study was being conducted, a similar study, commissioned by Oberlin's President Starr, was also being undertaken (Oberlin College, 1988). President Starr appointed a group in April of 1986 to study African-American retention at Oberlin. Interviews of more than 50 percent of the then currently enrolled African-American students were held in April of 1987. Interestingly, the President's research group came up with results strikingly similar to mine. Among their findings were that of all of the African-American students that were interviewed:

- 84% said the Afrikan Heritage House provides interesting programs
- 74% said the Afrikan Heritage House is good for social life
- 66% said the Afrikan Heritage House is a good source of support
- 84% said ABUSUA provides interesting programs
- 65% said ABUSUA is good for social life
- 68% said ABUSUA is a good source of support

- 84% felt that they could participate as much as they wished in campus social life
- 93% felt comfortable at Oberlin
- 76% said the social life at Oberlin is fairly or quite satisfying
- 86% said racism occurs at Oberlin
- 93% rated Student Support Services as a helpful resource

Also, (1) the chief reason cited by the respondents for the withdrawal of African-American students was financial difficulties, (2) Student Support Services is extensively utilized and adequate and (3) the major obstacle to the success of African-American students, according to these respondents, is racism.

Indeed, there is value in merging the study of organizations with the study of the concept of culture. Oberlin's success in enrolling and retaining African-American students came about because of its culture. The shared perception among the members of the organization includes the notion that Oberlin is tolerant of the presence of African-Americans. Therefore, when the members assess the real state of the organization, they are concerned with the extent to which the ideals of successful patterns of African-American enrollment and retention exist. The fact that this perception is widely held at Oberlin is what makes Oberlin unique among its peers. The challenge in higher education with regard to increased enrollment and retention of African-American students is to create a culture, with the attendant artifacts, which is in concert with the desired state of the organization.

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FIGURE I

DISCUSSION FRAMEWORK

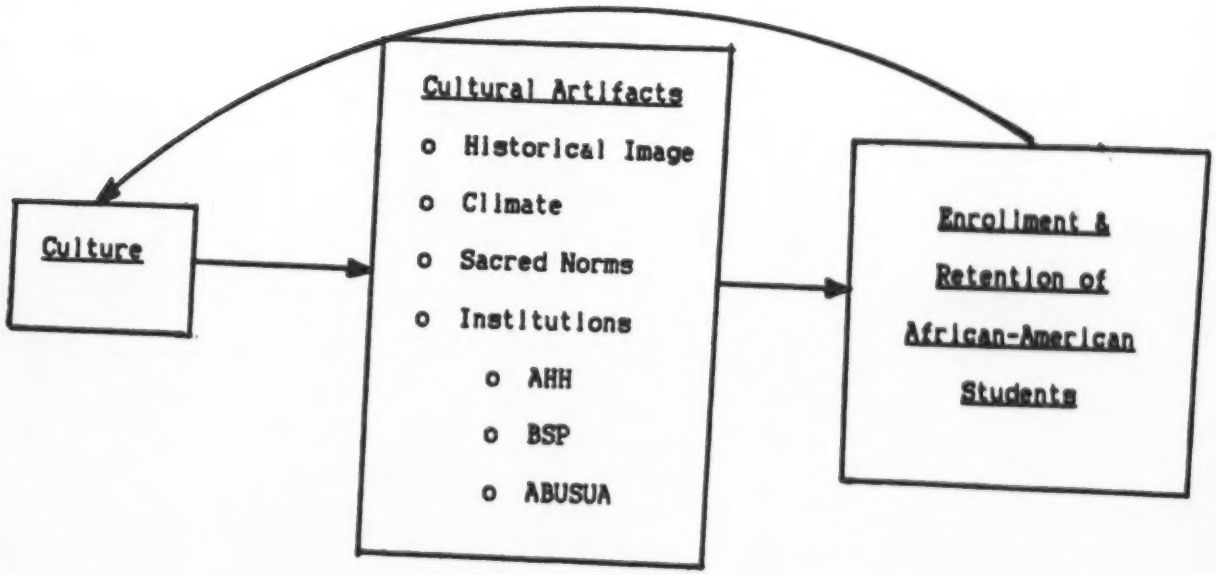

TABLE I

OVERVIEW OF SAMPLE

| | African-American | White | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Randomly Selected Faculty | 1 | 4 | 5 |
| Black Studies Faculty | 5 | - | 5 |
| Staff | 5 | 1 | 6 |
| African-American Students | 8 | - | 8 |
| Additional African-American Faculty | 1 | - | 1 |
| Administrators | 2 | 4 | 6 |
| TOTAL | 22 | 9 | 31 |